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ABSTRACT

The rate of turnover among community college chief executive officers (CEO's) is high, but the effects of administrator succession on organizational effectiveness has received little scholarly attention. To address this, a theory of community college CEO succession was derived from an analysis of case study data gathered at four locally governed public community colleges and from a literature review of leader succession studies conducted in other professions. The four college case studies involved CEO turnover from two routine retirements, one encouraged retirement, and one departure to accept another CEO position. The study utilized institutional histories, board/council records, and semi-structured interviews with presidents and other knowledgeable persons at the four colleges. Study findings indicated that: (1) CEO successions in public community colleges are followed within 2 years by changes in the administrative structure and in the membership of the college's administrative council; (2) governing boards will often seek and select successors who they think epitomize the institution and can represent it well to interested constituencies; (3) governing boards often use opportunities presented by presidential retirements to redirect the institution and compensate for perceived leadership deficits; (4) governing boards intuitively or consciously accept a "visible," extroverted administrative style as necessary for institutional change; (5) governing boards select successors who are different from their predecessors; and (6) governing boards seeking changes in direction will seek an outside successor. A literature review and a 33-item bibliography are included. (GFW)

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A Grounded Theory of Community College Presidential Succession

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Introduction

CEO succession is part of the future for all educational institutions. Kerr (1982), observing a group of nearly 50 college and university presidents, noted that about half of them had been in their current posts for two and a half years or less. Blum (29 Mar 89) reported a survey of more than 34,500 college and university administrators that revealed a 15% annual chief executive officer (CEO)[1] turnover rate for public two-year institutions. Roueche, Baker and Rose (1989) claim that "leaders make a difference" (p. 17), and that leadership is a critical factor in institutional effectiveness. Birnbaum (1988) stated that little is known about leadership. Studies of leadership have not produced consistent results.

CEO succession in community colleges has not been widely studied. Succession effects have been studied in various other organizational contexts, including US Army battalions (Kerner-Hoeg & O'Mara, 1980), athletic teams (Grusky, 1963; Gamson & Scotch, 1964; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1977), elementary and secondary schools (Mitchell, 1978; Mitchell & Thorsted, 1976; & O'Gawa & Smith, 1985), and a state mental hospital (Kotin & Sharaf, 1967). Studies in these contexts have provided informative insights to successor effect. Whether similar results could be expected in a public community college required exploratory research to answer.

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[1]In this paper CEO and president are used generically to indicate the chief executive of a college or university, recognizing that CEO titles vary from institution to institution.

Succession is a change in the formal leader of a group or organization (Gordon & Rosen, 1981). Succession can occur for many reasons including firing, health, relocation or retirement.

Successor effect is the measurable or perceived effect a new successor has on organizational effectiveness, culture or structure. Bjork (1985) studied succession in four-year institutions. Bjork's case study examined organizational change following the assumption of a new institutional mission at the University of New Mexico. He found that administrative positions increased in number following the addition of a new institutional mission.

Grusky (1963) examined reaction to CEO succession in private and for-profit organizations. He found a direct effect between CEO actions and organizational effectiveness. He also said that all successions were disruptive to the organization. Helmich and Brown (1972) found that successors promoted from within the organization caused fewer changes in the administrative structure in the two years following succession than did an outsider.

Unique characteristics of the community college suggested that a theory of succession in that context may prove useful to governing boards. Community colleges may also realize practical benefits of increased institutional effectiveness from such a theory. This paper reports results of an exploratory study of community college CEO succession.

There are several concepts central to understanding of succession literature. These concepts include ritual

scapegoating, insider or outsider succession and successors, local or cosmopolitan successors and succession and strategic replacement.

Ritual scapegoating occurs when a CEO is replaced to appease interested constituencies during transient performance declines (Gamson & Scotch, 1964). Organizational decline is officially attributed to the predecessor, whether or not he/she was responsible. His or her replacement with a new president signals to everyone that the management hierarchy is taking the steps society usually considers appropriate to correct the problem.

Inside successors are promoted from within the organization. Their loyalties are to their organization and its leadership. They are part of various formal and informal groups which may influence or inhibit change behaviors. Outsiders are strangers to the organization, and have no personal or political relationships that would affect their willingness to induce change.

The cosmopolitan-local construct (Gouldner, 1957-58) is a socio-psychological orientation rather than a geographical factor. Cosmopolitans seek status and recognition within their professional group. Examples are university professors and medical doctors. Locals advance up the managerial chain of an organization to which they are loyal. Locals receive recognition from organizational supervisors.

Strategic replacement is a change in key supervisory personnel after a succession (Gouldner, 1954). Strategic

replacement of key subordinate supervisors may be used to establish or open lines of communication disrupted by a succession. Loyalty to the predecessor, internal organizational politics and resentment of the successor may impede organizational communication. A strategic replacement is expected to improve organizational communication.

The predecessor's old lieutenants resent change and pursue alternative agendas. Strategic replacement removes or moves these old lieutenants, replacing them with subordinates loyal to the successor, thus opening effective communications channels.

CEO Succession and Organizational Performance

Results of succession studies are conflicting. Conventional wisdom suggests a positive relationship between CEO succession and improved organizational performance. Research suggests otherwise; CEOs may not have a demonstrable direct, immediate impact on organizational effectiveness.

Allen, Panian and Lotz (1979) conducted actuarial studies to assess effects of successor type (insider/outsider) on future performance of athletic teams. They found that team performance was not significantly affected by team member turnover or the frequency of CEO succession. However, in teams experiencing no CEO succession, there was generally slightly better performance than those experiencing a recent CEO succession(s). This result contradicts Gamson and Scotch (1964) findings that succession is often only an organizational ritual scapegoating behavior.

Gamson and Scotch found no performance difference between organizations with high and low levels of CEO succession.

All successions are disruptive to the organization (Grusky, 1960, 1963). Succession may cause a period of relative instability in an organization during which previously resolved resource allocation battles are re-fought and ideological differences among individuals and groups reemerge. These transition periods may also see performance standards reconsidered, goals reevaluated, new goals set and job responsibilities redefined (Gordon & Rosen, 1981).

Succession in Education

The dissimilar nature of value systems in education and business (Green, 1982) may limit the applicability of these studies to a community college context (Berger, 1983). A tradition of decentralized decision making, ambiguous goals, and faculty allegiance to academic discipline rather than a college or university characterize educational institutions. Additionally, high faculty specialization, expectation of faculty independence and inclusion in the decision-making process tend to differentiate educational institutions from business and governmental organizations (Baldridge, et al., 1977; Corson, 1980).

Corson (1980) observed that employees in a business corporation normally know who the supervisor or CEO is. There is no center of power and authority analogous to the business CEO in

colleges and universities. Rather, college and university CEOs often work in a participative environment with diffuse, sometimes ambiguous decision-making processes and obscure lines of responsibility and authority (Cohen & March, 1974).

Statement of the Problem

Turnover in community college chief executive officers is high. Moore (1984) reported that over 42% of the community college senior officials in 1,500 community colleges surveyed held their jobs for five years or less. Administrator succession in community colleges has received little scholarly attention. Differing value systems (Green, 1982) between business or government organizations in which succession research has been conducted and community colleges in which it has not may bias research results based solely on a literature review. An exploratory study of community college CEO succession was needed.

Study Purpose

The "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of community college CEO succession presented here provides a partial explanation what happens when a community college president changes. The theory describes community college CEO succession and the effects that governing boards have on succession. The theory was derived from an analysis of case study data gathered at four locally governed public community colleges.

An extensive literature review suggested a grounded theory of CEO succession in community colleges might describe events such as:

a. strategic replacement activities following succession;

b. changes in the formal organizational structure before or after succession;

c. inside/outside nature of succession;

d. organizational health of the institution relative to the inside/outside nature of the successor.

Two preliminary theoretical categories were derived from a review of literature:

a. CEO succession effects on formal internal organizational design.

b. CEO succession effect on occupying of key supervisory positions subordinate to and/or reporting to the CEO. These two preliminary theoretical categories and others which emerged and were saturated in the course of data collection were integrated into a grounded theory of community college CEO succession.

Data Gathering Methodology

This study used case study methodology and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of theory development to examine events related to the succession of community college presidents. Data were gathered from documentary sources and

semi-structured interviews. Documentary sources included institutional histories, college catalogs, governing board and executive council records, professional association fact books and reports. Data were also collected from searches of ERIC data bases and one masters thesis which reported a college history. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with presidents and other knowledgeable persons at all four institutions.

A literature review guided the development of preliminary theoretical categories used in the initial campus research visit. Using the literature review to develop preliminary categories did not fully conform to the approach advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1962). They suggested researchers initially ignore the literature in order to assure that emerging theoretical categories were not contaminated by unsuitable or ill-fitting concepts.

Delimitations

This study was limited to community college presidential successions occurring between 1985 and 1987. It was also limited to those public community colleges with local boards responsible for institutional governance.

Significance

The unique nature of the community college and the increased value placed on enhanced effectiveness (Cohen & Brawer, 1982) require an improved understanding of the impact of CEO succession

and its disruptive effects (Grusky, 1960) on the institution. Better understanding of possible impacts of presidential succession on the community college will contribute to a reduction in institutional disruption associated with a succession.

Case Studies

The study included four case studies. Data from the first case were examined to assess conformity to preliminary theoretical categories and to identify emergent theoretical categories. Data from subsequent cases were examined on the basis of theoretical categories emerging from preceding cases. Data evaluation and comparison continued until a grounded theory could be postulated.

Each study case was of a nonprejudicial succession, including two routine retirements, one "encouraged" retirement (not a firing) and one departure to accept another CEO position. Three of the successions were of presidents with 15 or more years in the position. The other succession occurred in a community college that had experienced a succession every 5-7 years since being founded. The institution which had changed CEOs every 5-7 years had, in all four successions, appointed an outsider. Since all of these cases were nominally routine and nonprejudicial, they should not be considered representative of all community college presidential successions.

Findings

The researcher examined the data to determine how they conformed to constructs identified in the literature review. The scapegoating construct of Gamson and Scotch (1964) was not supported. Predecessor CEO retirement was an artifact of the cases selected. Predecessor CEOs in two cases left their positions because of normal retirement, one left to accept a more responsible position and the last to accept early (encouraged) retirement. Therefore, no data affirming or negating the scapegoat construct was discovered.

Thiemann (1968) found that institutions with a history of hiring insiders as presidents or with CEOs of long (unspecified) tenure may have "diluted" (p. 53) leadership. Dilution implied an institution in which the CEO gave more management attention to internal political demands than to management of the organization for its intended purpose. CEOs in organizations with diluted leadership seek to maintain the status quo, compromising organizational needs to meet other expectations of its members. Thiemann noted that when this happens a "purging outsider" (p. 53) must be found to revitalize the organization. In each of the cases an outsider was employed. One college benefitted from an outside successor who was expected to capitalize on the predecessor's successes. In another case the institution was well administered by a long-term predecessor but the board wanted a "different kind of leadership." The third college had a history of CEO successions every five to seven years.

Successions were almost routine. The fourth case strongly supported Thiemann's finding. It examined a "stagnant" institution and a governing board that wanted major changes quickly.

Berger (1983) found that governing boards often expected changes in organizational shape and/or membership of the senior administrative council following a CEO succession. In three cases, the governing boards wanted increased institutional visibility in their communities and more vigorously marketed institutions. While these governing boards did not specifically direct organizational changes, changes occurred nonetheless. In the fourth case, the governing board directed the successor to implement major institutional change. The board wanted the institution's organizational structure redesigned, more effective service to the district, a proactive management style emplaced, and reduced institutional "bureaucracy."

The One Way Causality Model (Grusky, 1963) of successor effect was also supported. Grusky's One Way Causality Model suggested that CEO's have a direct effect (positive or negative) on organizational effectiveness. Governing boards embraced the assumption of CEO effect and capitalized on predecessor CEO departures to redirect institutions. Governing boards in each case wanted change and selected a successor CEO they expected to carry out instructions concerning college change. In each case, opinion leaders stated that change(s) had occurred and had conformed to governing board expectations. It is not clear

whether organizational changes were actual or only perceived. Governing boards and administration expected change, therefore they may have seen change which was attributed to the successor.

The Negative Effect (NE) Model of succession effect, which stated that every succession was disruptive to the organization (Grusky, 1960, 1963), was supported by the data. Data in two cases indicated disruption of informal institutional communication networks and changed power relationships relative to the CEO. The reorganization directed by the governing board in one case disrupted informal institutional communication networks, changed power relationships relative to the CEO and made several changes in membership and organizational structure of the president's council.

The data did not support the No Way Causality (NWC) Model (Gamson & Scotch, 1964) of successor effect. The NWC Model stated that a succession has no short-term effect on organizational effectiveness. In all cases, interviewees perceived changes in the organization soon after succession.

Helmich (1974) noted that inside successions were non-adaptive organizational behaviors. Non-adaptive behavior shows a lack of organizational interest in gathering important information from the environment with which it can relate and legitimate itself to the external constituencies. Helmich termed an organization with outside successors adaptive. An adaptive organization seeks information from the environment so that it may more effectively relate externally.

Since, in all cases of this study, the institutions had conducted national searches for successor CEOs and had hired outsiders, there were no inside successors with whom to compare and contrast performance. However, in two of the cases the outsider had prior senior educational administrative experience in the state community college system. In both of these cases, the institutions had been stable and governing boards were satisfied with the predecessors' performance. The governing boards sought stability and visibility for the institutions, not potentially disruptive changes. Successor selection from within a state system raises the question of the degree to which a successor may be considered a true outsider.

Stoke (1959) noted that the idea of forming a new administrative team is intuitively appealing but difficult to implement. If a successor CEO could form a new administrative constellation following each succession, administrative positions would share the tenure of the CEO. There was no evidence in three of the cases of any previous professional relationship between the successor and any newly employed members of the executive group. In one case, the successor had previously known a person hired into the president's council. The successor in this case had disassociated himself from the selection process until a final hiring recommendation was made. This study affirms Stokes' idea that a successor is unlikely to form a new administrative team.

Prior research suggested that strategic replacement was an effective means of opening communication channels (Gouldner, 1954). This was not supported by the study. In two cases where strategic replacement or major organizational change had occurred there were perceptions of less effective communications and lowered morale among the faculty. In both cases, key faculty and senior administrators reported a feeling of fear and insecurity following changes. In this study, strategic replacement appeared to inhibit communication.

Bradshaw (1974) found that changes in board membership had no apparent effect on presidential tenure. This study affirmed his findings. There was no evidence that changes in governing board membership had affected CEO tenure. In one case, major board membership changes were too recent to have produced significant policy changes.

This study did not support Gouldner's (1954) conclusion that new successors tended to increase organizational bureaucracy. On the contrary, in all four cases the governing board stated or implied that the successor was to open up communications between faculty, staff and administration. In each case the board sought a successor leader who would reduce institutional bureaucracy and college "over-administration" which had developed over time.

This research produced findings that refuted some previous research and supported others. The picture is still unclear.

Emergent Theoretical Categories

In addition to the two preliminary categories which were developed during the literature review, six emergent categories were sufficiently supported to be included in the theory. They were:

a. Governing boards may seek and select successor CEOs who epitomize the institution or can represent the institution effectively to interested constituencies.

b. Governing boards may seize opportunities such as a routine or non-routine presidential departure to redirect the institution, capitalize on predecessor leadership strengths and successes and compensate for predecessor leadership shortcomings.

c. Governing boards may intuitively or consciously accept a "visible" administrative style as necessary for institutional change.

d. Governing boards tend to select a successor CEO with a personality/management style different from the predecessor's.

e. Community college governing boards seeking changes in institutional goals and direction will seek an outside successor.

A Grounded Theory of Community College CEO Succession

This theory integrates data categories which became sufficiently saturated during this study to warrant inclusion in the theory.

CEO successions in public community colleges are followed within two years by changes in the organizational administrative structure. Changes in administrative structure may be made in response to governing board expectations or external political or economic pressures. Changes may also be made to reduce the size of the institutional bureaucracy and make the institution more efficient.

CEO successions in public community colleges are followed within two years by changes in the membership of the administrative council of the institution. Administrative council membership will change for different reasons including voluntary resignations, retirements and health related problems. Members will also change as the shape of the administrative structure changes. Some will depart voluntarily, perhaps reacting to stress associated with a CEO change. New members may replace those departing or occupy newly created positions.

Governing boards will often seek and select successors who they think epitomize the institution and can represent the institution effectively to interested constituencies. Governing boards seek new presidents who will maximize external and internal support to the institution. They are also expected to communicate the goals and needs of the institution to all interested constituencies. Governing boards want effective institutional marketers.

Governing boards often seize opportunities presented by presidential retirements to redirect the institution and

compensate for perceived predecessor leadership deficits. Governing boards will take advantage of CEO successions as a logical time to institute change. Change may be minor, causing few modifications to how an institution operates post-succession. Change may be major, and include strategic replacement(s), changes in institutional policies or a general reorientation of the institutional mission. Changes usually have clear intent, including improvement of institutional internal and external communications, improvement of service to the institutional district or reorganization to reduce bureaucracy and improve efficiency.

Governing boards intuitively or consciously accept a "visible", extroverted administrative style as necessary for institutional change. Governing boards seek an extroverted successor to actively promote the institution and publicize institutional needs to various constituencies.

Governing boards select successors different from their predecessors. This is related to the boards' desire for visible leadership. A different personality demonstrates to all interested constituencies that college leadership has changed. A different personality and/or management style will also be required to cause change in the institution.

Community college governing boards seeking changes in direction will seek an outside successor. Boards presume that organizational change can best be instituted by an outside

successor who will not be encumbered by the political and personal relationships that may inhibit an insider.

Summary

Community college presidential succession impacts institutional administrative organization and membership of the president's council. Governing boards seek CEOs who will effectively represent and market the institution. Governing boards prefer to wait for a routine CEO departure as an opportunity to hire a successor CEO rather than fire a president. Governing boards assume a strong personality, e.g., a visible, extroverted leader, will also be an effective change agent. The predecessors in this study were not extroverts; their successor were. The governing boards in all four cases wanted a different administrative style. The extroverted personalities of the successors may have been an artifact of the only way governing boards could evaluate predecessor and successor differences.

CEO succession effects in community colleges are similar to and different from succession effects reported in other studies. Prior succession studies presented contradictory results in public and for-profit organizations. Contradictory results discovered in the course of this study may have been expected. However, contradictory results in this study do not also imply that study findings may not be useful to CEOs and governing boards.

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